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AUTHOR Klemens, Lynne
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ABSTRACT

A study determined if handicapped adolescents have an interest in reading novels about handicapped teenagers. Many in this population tend to be reluctant readers. Generating interest in reading is important in helping to change that tendency. Reading novels concerning adolescents with handicaps or problems may also be considered a type of therapy for teenagers with school problems of handicaps. To discover the feelings of this population, 192 high school students classified as emotionally disturbed or perceptually impaired, were given a survey/questionnaire. Results were tallied to discover the amount of interest these classified adolescents had in reading about handicapped characters. Results indicated that: (1) the majority of the students did not read novels nor would books with handicapped characters entice these students to read more novels; and (2) some students reflected anger towards the idea of being classified as handicapped and tended to reject the idea of reading about handicapped characters. Six tables of data are included and the survey instrument is attached. (Contains 49 references.)
(Author/RS)

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Are handicapped adolescents interested in reading fiction with handicapped characters?

By Lynne Klemens

accepted
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Albert J. Mazurkiewicz

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree in Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if handicapped adolescents have an interest in reading novels about handicapped teenagers. Many in this population tend to be reluctant readers. Generating interest in reading is important in helping to change that tendency. Reading novels concerning adolescents with handicaps or problems may also be considered a type of therapy for teenagers with school problems or with handicaps. To discover the feelings of this population, one hundred ninety-two classified high school students were given a survey/questionnaire. The students were asked to anonymously fill out the survey. Results were tallied to discover the amount of interest these classified adolescents had in reading about handicapped characters. The results showed that the majority of these students do not read novels nor would books with handicapped characters entice these students to read more novels. Some students reflected anger towards the idea of being classified as handicapped and tended to reject the idea of reading about handicapped characters.

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Most children do not read very much during their free time according to Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading (1984). Reading can be an "antidote to stress" as well as a positive factor in the "pursuit of excellence" (Strang, 1963).

In order to arouse students' desires to read, Whitworth (1966) suggests that teachers should guide students in the selection of books to help build within the student the habit of choosing worthwhile literature.

Anderson, Higgins and Wurster (1985) indicate, based on their research, that poor readers make poor choices because appropriate books may not be available, they may not know how to judge the suitability of a book or they may choose books for show rather than pleasure perhaps feeling embarrassment over their true choices. Yet, students, when given choices, seem to enjoy books about teenage problems that seem realistic to them (Samuels, 1989; Scares, 1963). As Vogel and Zancanella (1991) point out, students' reading preferences are connected to their individual personality. Their choices grow out of their particular situations and conditions in their lives.

Interest appears to be a very potent factor in determining reading comprehension (Estes, Vaugh, 1973).

According to Groff (1962), reading comprehension of an individual child is influenced to a degree by the type of content being read. Walker, Noland, and Greenshields (1979) suggest that interest has a greater influence than readability on comprehension, particularly among lower ability readers.

Reading interests of adolescents have been explored through numerous studies (Sizemore, 1963). Reading can help individuals obtain psychological and emotional relief because it can offer information and examples to help us resolve our problems. It may help us to determine what roles we are to assume in life and how to carry out these roles. This all leads to interest in reading (Soares, 1963).

Wyndham (1968) suggests that stories for elementary age children and adolescents should be centered around their own interests and experiences. In each age group, children like to read about youngsters in the leading roles who are as old or older than they themselves--almost never younger. Readers usually want to identify with the hero.

Wyndham adds that the five important needs of children are 1. the need to be loved; 2. the need to belong (be accepted by family and peers); 3. the need to

achieve (ex. learning to live with a handicap); 4. the need for security (material, emotional, spiritual); and 5. the need to know.

Sharing a common experience with someone can be a comfort, points out Fassler (1978). Literature can be used to deal with death, separation experiences, hospitalization, illness, life style changes and other stresses.

There is a wide variety of handicapping or disabling conditions found among today's students. One particular group in the majority at present is the learning disabled group (Cummings, Fisher, 1990).

After reviewing available books, Janet Gold (1983) stated that more books of high quality with learning disabled children as central characters need to be written so that learning disabled children can be helped to overcome the difficulty in accepting themselves for what they are, in reliving past experiences and in gaining insight into their problems. Doreen Kronick (1986) echoed this need for learning disabled students.

Perhaps there is a need for literature to aid all handicapped groups in the acceptance of their differences. According to Harris and Baskin (1988) there seems to have been a dramatic increase since the

1940's or greater visibility of disabled persons in literature. Some of the more contemporary novels they found seemed to include the learning disabled. Many such adolescent novels have been found to be realistic and objective (Stroud, 1981). There is some well-written fiction about the handicapped (Stark, 1986; Stroud, 1981). However, there seems to be a need for more and better books for all types of disabled children according to Orjasaeter (1981).

Books about handicaps appear to have several purposes: 1. to suggest that the handicap has redeeming features; 2. to make handicapped people feel better; 3. to famililarize handicapped and non-handicapped people with the handicap; and 4. to deal with non-handicapped persons' feelings about handicapped people (Kronick, 1986).

According to Stroud (1981) and Harris and Baskin (1988) some handicapped characters in novels are depicted cruelly or the author's contempt or hostility may show through. Hence, the need for better books.

Often handicapped adolescents found in special education classes are reluctant readers. They are often not interested in reading. Many of these students also tend to have difficulty in accepting their disabilities

or differences. Bibliotherapy or the use of literature is often attempted in helping in this matter.

HYPOTHESIS

To add to the body of information on this topic, the following study was undertaken. It was hypothesized that handicapped students in special education classes would reject the reading of novels with handicapped characters. More particularly, they would reject reading about characters with similar handicaps or problems to their own. Despite the call for better materials and the purposes they serve, there might be little need for more adolescent literature with handicapped characters, since the readers that could be most helped by this literature might have no interest and might reject this type of reading.

PROCEDURES

One hundred ninety-two classified students from the Union County Regional High School District responded to a survey/questionnaire that was distributed by their special education teachers. The survey was to establish their interest in reading novels with handicapped characters.

The survey consisted of fourteen items. The first item was to discover the student's classification, the

next four items to discover types of reading materials that interest them, frequency of reading and reason why novels might not be chosen. The next six items dealt with their interest in reading novels with handicapped characters. One item was on their interest in teenage characters and the last two items asked for book titles they knew with handicapped characters and also an explanation of why they might not be interested in reading about handicapped people.

These surveys were distributed through the resource room teachers and the teachers of the self-contained programs for Perceptually Impaired, Neurologically Impaired, Emotionally Disturbed and Hearing Impaired. The students were then asked to fill out the survey anonymously and teachers were told that they could offer explanations for any questions if necessary. They were also told not to pressure a student who did not wish to fill out the survey. The results were then tallied by the researcher to discover the amount of interest these classified adolescents had in reading about handicapped characters.

RESULTS

Table 1 illustrates the results of students' responses to the request for them to check the

classification that best describes them (question one on the questionnaire). Some students checked more than one classification.

Table I

Type of classification responses

Learning problems	133	or	69%
Hearing problems	22	or	11%
Emotional or Behavior problems	23	or	11%
Orthopedically handicapped	10	or	5%
Vision problems	14	or	7%
No answer given	31	or	16%

As can be seen, the majority of the students who were surveyed have learning problems. The group of students who would not check a classification wrote comments on the questionnaire to show their anger concerning the term "handicapped" or "classification". All of these students were either classified as emotionally disturbed or perceptually impaired (learning problems) according to feedback from their teachers. The researcher was asked to meet with a small group of these students to respond to their comments. It became clear that the students were angered by the semantics used in the questionnaire. These students, according to their

teachers, were also students who were least likely to admit to having learning or emotional problems. Having the researcher listen to their complaints seemed to help dissipate some of their anger.

In response to the second question on the survey, "Check materials you read", the overwhelming choices were magazines and newspapers. Magazines was the first choice. Question three asked how often the choices were read and daily and weekly were selected by the majority for both choices.

The order of the responses chosen for question four, "If you do not like to read novels, please check the reasons why:", are shown according to popularity. Most chose "The novels are too long.". The second most popular choice was that "The characters are usually boring.". The third choice was "I have difficulty understanding the vocabulary.". Few students chose "I have difficulty understanding the story.".

In question five, "When you do read, from where do you get most of your reading materials?", the majority chose, "home".

Table II illustrates the results of the students' responses to the question, "Have you ever read any books with teenage characters who had the same problems or handicaps as you?"(question six).

Table II

Numbers of student responses on handicapped teenage characters with similar problems to theirs

YES	56	or	29%
NO	136	or	70%

As can be seen, the majority of the students said they had not read any books with teenage characters who had the same problems as themselves. However, from some of the additional comments on the questionnaires, the researcher suspected that some students may have responded to only part of that question, rejecting the fact that they had any problems. Therefore, answering NO may have been based on their thoughts that they had no problems rather than on whether they had read any books about teenagers with problems. Out of the students who answered YES for this question, the majority said they enjoyed reading that type of novel in question seven.

Table III illustrates the results of students' responses to question eight, "Have you ever read any books with teenage characters who had different problems or handicaps from yours?"

Table III

Number of responses on reading books with characters having different problems from theirs

YES	127	or	66%
NO	65	or	33%

As is shown, the majority of the students said that they had read books about teenage characters who had different problems or handicaps from themselves. Again, this response may be slightly inaccurate due to the anger that some students felt while answering the survey. However, the majority of the students who read these books said that they had enjoyed them in question nine.

Table IV illustrates the results of students' responses to question ten, "Do you think you would read novels more often if their characters had problems or handicaps similar to yours?".

Table IV

Number of responses to question on reading novels more often if characters had problems similar to theirs

YES	59	or	30%
NO	133	or	69%

As can be seen, the majority of the students said that having books available to them concerning characters with problems or handicaps similar to their own would not encourage them to read more often.

Table V illustrates the students' responses for question eleven, "Do you think you would read novels more often if their characters had problems or handicaps different from yours?".

Table V

Number of responses on reading novels with characters having problems different from theirs

YES	55	or	28%
NO	137	or	71%

As is shown, the majority of the students said that having novels available to them with characters having handicaps or problems different from their own would not encourage them to read more often.

In response to question twelve, "Do you enjoy reading about characters your own age?", most students answered YES.

Many students responded to question thirteen, "Please list the titles of any books you have read about teenagers with any problems or handicaps:". However,

several students listed titles of books that were not about handicapped teenagers but were about problems that any teenagers may confront in their lives.

Some students responded to the final question (number fourteen), "If you would not be interested in reading about handicaps, please tell why:" and Table VI shows these results.

Table VI

Responses on reasons for not reading

Reasons: "boring", "just not interested"		
41	or	21%
Reasons: "uncomfortable", "depressing", "emotional"		
19	or	9%
Responses such as, "enjoyable", "I like them"		
5	or	2%
Responses such as, "I hate it", "Hard enough to be handicapped without reading about it"		
17	or	8%

As was shown, a few people responded to the question even if they did enjoy reading about handicapped characters. Several others gave reasons why they did not wish to read about handicapped characters. 9% of these reasons showed some thought, e.g. "would feel

uncomfortable", "depressing", "too emotional" or "don't like to be reminded of my problems because it is hard enough".

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study support the hypothesis that adolescents in special education classes would reject the reading of novels with handicapped characters. The majority of the students surveyed rejected novel reading due to the length of the reading required. From the survey, it became apparent that many students in special education classes do not accept their differences or problems. Many of them seem to view the term "handicapped" in a very narrow sense and reject the word and anything to which it may be connected. Out of the minority of students who had read novels with handicapped characters, a majority enjoyed these books. However, the majority of students felt that they would not be encouraged to read novels more often if these novels with handicapped characters were readily available to them.

The implication of this study is that teachers should be aware that many students in special education classes are not accepting their difficulties. Several may react with anger when discussing or reading about

handicaps. Perhaps bibliotherapy can help the adolescents in special education accept the fact that they have learning differences or problems. It is thought that they should learn to overcome or work around their differences to enable them to look at themselves in a more positive light rather than so strongly rejecting help offered because it comes from a special education class or from a book with the term "handicapped" in it. Teachers should continue to encourage this reading of novels which happen to have handicapped characters in them. However, teachers should not expect all special education students to welcome these books with open arms or to have a desire to read of "the sometimes harsh realities of a handicapped person's life", as one surveyed student commented.

READING INTERESTS AND THE HANDICAPPED:

RELATED RESEARCH

At times the learning process can be impeded by emotional problems, therefore, according to Janet Stroud (1981), teachers have an obligation to help students to adjust. She feels that literature is an excellent way of instilling understanding and acceptance of others. Anthony Soares (1963) states that reading touches on many aspects which relate to our daily lives. When these assumptions become realities in reading, the result may be satisfaction, pleasure and tension-reduction. As a consequence, we are interested in what we are reading.

According to Lee Wyndham ((1968), author of Writing for Children and Teenagers, stories for elementary age children and adolescents should be centered around their own interests and experiences. Wyndham states, "Writing for young people is a great responsibility because their minds are impressionable and what they read can affect not only their current lives but even their futures...The purpose of fiction is to interest the reader and to make him feel something."

Phyllis A. Whitney (1976), author of Writing Juvenile Stories and Novels, feels that fiction can show any reader that no one of us is alone or unique, that others have been over this road too and found a way. Or

if the character gave up and wasn't able to cope, readers can see that too and perhaps understand why.

G. Robert Carlsen (1967), author of Books and the Teenage Reader, feels that without the adolescent novels of today many a potential reader would fall into the chasm of non-reading and never be able to extricate himself.

Books dealing with the handicapped can prove to be helpful for the handicapped themselves as well as for others (Kronick, 1986). Recent research in this area states some positive results. Lenkowsky, Barowsky, Dayboch and Puccio (1987) report an increase in self-concept after the use of such books with learning disabled and emotionally handicapped adolescents in a classroom setting. Hopkins-Best and Wiinamaki (1985) report the use of such books aided in successful school-to-work transition for disabled adolescents. Some learning problems may also be helped to overcome through this route. In dealing with the average student's acceptance of the handicapped, books can help a great deal (Sullivan, 1987).

There seems, however, to be a need for books concerning all types of handicaps (Orjasaeter,1981). More particularly books with learning disabled

characters with problems other than reading are needed (Harris, Baskin, 1988) (Kronick, 1986) (Gold, 1983). Stanchfield, (1962), goes so far as to suggest that teachers should take leaves of absence in order to write books for the needs of their students.

This is not to say that there are no good books on the handicapped available. Bibliographies are available such as Robertson's (1991) Portraying Persons with Disabilities (Nonfiction) and her new fiction bibliography with the same name (1992). Numerous researchers have reviewed such books and found many to be suitable and many to be quite terrible (Stark, 1986),(Stroud, 1981),(Gold, 1983), (Kronick, 1986). Shirley Wagoner (1984) recommends some good books with handicapped characters but urges us to continue to be aware of the importance in depicting the handicapped fairly. Radencich (1986) found some good literature where people just happen to have a handicap and cautions that stories should be free from stereotypes of the handicapped.

Interest and motivation are two important factors to be considered when discussing student literacy. Because of the lack of communication between teachers and students in the reading selection process, as noted

by Blair and Turner (1982), an effort should be made to match reading material with student interests.

Desire or motivation must come first and can be taken from teacher enthusiasm and arousal of imagination and curiosity (Whitworth, 1966). Timothy Rasinski (1988) states, "Interest, purpose and choice need to be at the heart of the literacy curriculum at all levels." Reading interest can be generated by the student but students must become aware of this so that they can use it to their advantage (Ortiz, 1983).

Teachers should choose reading materials that are interesting to students since there is no factor as powerful as interest to increase reading skill, promote the reading habit and produce a generation of book lovers (Norvell, 1946).

Walter Barbe (1963) discussed the importance of "self-selection" and how allowing students to select their own reading materials, regardless of the difficulty of the material, encourages a permanent interest in reading. Witty, Coomer and McBean (1946) found many of the books chosen by students as "favorites" conformed very closely to adult standards of grade level and quality. They also found that many books on the intermediate grades favorites list were

found on the high school favorites list. The reverse was also true. Often, when self-selection is allowed self-assessment and self-direction follow (Wells, 1989). Kopel (1963) cautions that interest can die when little effort is needed to participate in the activity just as it dies when the activity makes overwhelming demands. However, books which fill an interest, need and can be read easily and are likely to start children on the reading habit (Anderson, Higgins, Wurster, 1985).

Bernstein (1955) defined interest as a complex feeling or attitude derived from 1. characteristics of the reader, including his physical and emotional well-being at the time of the reading, his background of experiences, his favorite occupations and hobbies, and his ability to understand material; 2. factors inherent in the text itself, including form and style of writing, logical organization, and human interest; and 3. interaction of the reader and the material including the extent to which the material stimulates the readers' imaginations, facilitates his identification with characters in the text, fulfills his needs or arouses his emotions. Bernstein found that reading interest had an association with superior comprehension. She suggests that schools should encourage students to read

of their interests.

Studies of children's and adolescents' interests have been made on the assumption that if we can discover what an adolescent's interests are, we should be able to help him develop wider and deeper interests. If the teacher knows which books a pupil enjoys, he can suggest others by the same author or on the same subject. We need to know more about how a student's other interests are likely to affect his reading interests. Then we would be in a better position to help adolescents satisfy their psychological needs by choosing good books that reflect their personal concerns and give them insight into modern social problems (Strang, 1963).

Sizemore (1963) in his summary of junior high reading interest investigations, concluded that the students need guidance from teachers, parents and librarians in choosing reading materials. He found that both poor and good readers chose the same titles so that there is little need to make two separate lists for these readers. However, there is a need to provide books based on the students' interests.

Some effective tools and methods for teachers to discover students' reading interests are: 1. informal student conferences; 2. interest inventories (published

and teacher-made); 3. conferences with the parents; 4. check lists of favorite activities and books; and 5. class discussions (Bowes, 1963). Lamburg (1977) advocated the use of inventories of problems and goals in reading. Witty, Coomer and McBean (1960) identified various ways of studying interests such as the questionnaire, the interview, the "log" of activities, the interest inventory, anecdotal records and observation under various conditions.

There have been multitudinous studies done on students' reading interests. A numerous amount of these studies have concerned adolescents. Andersen (1946) found slightly different reading preferences between boys and girls. She suggested that teachers aid students in evaluating reading materials and should attempt to create new interests in their students. Teachers should also encourage parental cooperation in keeping up with reading standards.

In a study of children's recreational reading, fiction had the greatest appeal. However, reading as a recreational activity ranked low among other activities. It was also found that there was a decrease of student reading in higher grades (Mauch, Swanson, 1949).

Another study showed that interest in reading about

teenagers and children increased by the seventh and eighth grades. Little differences were found in the reading interests of children from rural, urban and metropolitan centers. Contrary to many other studies, this one found few differences between the sexes concerning interests (Shores, 1954).

Smith and Eno (1961) asked junior and senior high students, "If you could have an author write a story-to-order for you, what would you have him put in it?". All of the students liked teenage stories. The boys wanted stories about boys and the girls wanted a strong heroine. The junior high boys wanted stories of mystery, sports, science fiction and adventure. The senior high boys wanted adventure stories. Both groups of girls wanted romance stories.

In a study to determine the general picture of reading interests of eighth grade students, it was found that the intelligence factor did not influence students' reading choices. A marked contrast was found between boys' and girls' interests. Boys preferred mystery and science while the girls preferred stories of home and school (Vaughn, 1963).

Adolescents are not necessarily interested in reading about the things they like to do nor in doing

the things they like to read about (Strang, 1963). However, in a study by Soares (1963), it was found there was more interest in realistic stories in contempory times and most often in stories about sports and teenagers.

Ashley (1970) recommended that teachers should conduct studies in their own classes to determine their likes and dislikes in reading. Ashley stated "fitting a book to a child" cannot be done unless the interests and dislikes of the children are known. It was found to be best to encourage good reading habits before or in grade four and perhaps grade five. By grade five, reading tastes have usually become established.

From Samuels study (1989), students overwhelmingly said they liked books with teen protagonists and stories that might be termed realistic fiction or "problem" novels. These were books that seemed real to them or that involved teens with problems that they themselves had or thought those around them had. They enjoyed fast-paced stories that made them feel involved in action through development of character or description of a place. They also reported they might be interested in a particular subject and would want to read about it. Among other choices, students said they enjoyed books

about the handicapped.

Many of the studies previously mentioned address the importance of student interests. It appears that boys and girls have strong preferences as to the types of books they like to read. It is also apparent that as students progress through the grades their interests change. Some researchers found that it is important to determine students' likes and dislikes and recommended several ways to obtain this information. Finally, most of them agree that it is important to encourage good reading habits. Few of these reading interests studies mentioned the handicapped, neither in the characters of the books or of the students studied. Some studies mentioned poor versus good readers. No differences were found between these two groups in their reading preferences. A study on these two groups in terms of numbers of books or magazines read also did not show any differences between the groups (Haffner, Palmer, Tullos, 1986).

Two recent studies on deaf adolescents touched on reading interests. Ewoldt, Israelite and Dodds (1992) interviewed deaf high school students and their teachers for their perceptions of the interest and difficulty of three types of text. The teachers in this study

underestimated the extent to which their students could comprehend independently, often based on insubstantial evidence. The text perceived to be most difficult by both teachers and students was also considered the most interesting to students, but not to teachers. Teachers also tended to foster dependence rather than independence in the strategies they offered to their students.

In the other study, the factors used by teachers of the hearing impaired in identifying the reading interests of their students were investigated. Many of the teachers used factors recommended by other studies the least in identifying the interests of their students. Students completed a reading interest inventory and their answers were compared with their teachers' judgments. The results indicated that teachers were only moderately accurate in judging their students' reading interests (Stoefen-Fisher, 1990).

Perhaps these studies might offer some insight to teachers of other handicapped students. In the studies done to review literature depicting characters who are handicapped, it seems to be assumed that students will care to read these books. However, from all of these studies combined, handicapped students seem to be

underestimated particularly when their interests are not even considered. In many cases their reading interests may be the same as the non-handicapped adolescent population. However, due to some of the psychological trauma caused by their handicaps they may find reading about handicaps too upsetting. These ideas may lend themselves to future studies.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY

1. Check the type of classification that best describes you:
___learning problems
___hearing problems
___emotional or behavior problems
___orthopedically handicapped
___vision problems

2. Check materials you read:
___novels
___magazines
___newspapers
___other

3. Check how often you read

	daily	weekly	monthly	yearly
novels	___	___	___	___
magazines	___	___	___	___
newspapers	___	___	___	___
other	___	___	___	___

4. If you do not like to read novels, please check the reasons why:
___I have difficulty understanding the story.
___I have difficulty understanding the vocabulary.
___The characters are usually boring.
___The novels are too long.

5. When you do read, from where do you get most of your reading materials?
___home
___classroom
___library
___friends
___stores

6. Have you ever read any books with teenage characters who had the same problems or handicaps as you?
__Yes __No

7. If question #6 was YES, did you enjoy reading that type of novel? __Yes __No

8. Have you ever read any books with teenage characters who had different problems or handicaps from yours?
__Yes __No

9. If question #8 was YES, did you enjoy reading that type of novel? __Yes __No

10. Do you think you would read novels more often if their characters had problems or handicaps similar to yours?
__Yes __No

11. Do you think you would read novels more often if their characters had problems or handicaps different from yours? __Yes __No

12. Do you enjoy reading about characters your own age?
__Yes __No

13. Please list the title of any books you have read about teenagers with any problems or handicaps:

14. If you would not be interested in reading about handicaps, please tell why:

THANK YOU!